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@ JIM CARROLL

White House site reflects corporate Web indifference

BY JIM CARROLL

If the leader of the free world isn't really serious about the Web, are leaders in the corporate world? I'm still convinced that the answer is no

So there he was on stage, taking the oath of office, promising a new beginning, a new era in co-operation, and a new, aggressive outlook to the future. George "Dubya" Bush is here, and everything is going to be swell.

The world took a collective breath and hoped that perhaps the rhetoric might be real. That is, until the more astute observers in the Internet world checked out www.whitehouse.gov at the moment of transition. They found that in an absolutely unprecedented transfer of power, the old Clinton White House site disappeared, and the new Bush White House site ventured forth on to the world stage.

And what a site it is. Noted one well-known Internet writer in an online discussion list, "Um, did they just throw it together last night? A more uninspired display of hypertext I haven't seen since before Mosaic was invented."

Indeed, a visit to the Dubya's new site is like a trip back to the Net in the early days of 1994. Check it out at www.whitehouse.gov. (On the odd chance that they have managed an upgrade to the site since the early days of the presidency, you can check out a couple of the pages at www.jimcarroll.com/dubya/index.html.)

Then compare it to the Clinton site. In a remarkable display of digital preservation, the U.S. National Archives is busy creating a time-based archive of the various Clinton Internet incarnations at clinton.nara.gov.

Take a look at the Clinton site of 1994, and then look at the Dubya site of 2001. It's uncanny: the current White House has adopted Web design principles of 1994. In one fell swoop, Dubya has managed to proclaim to the world, loud and clear, that he and his team are but a bunch of technological dunces. A few bytes short of a program. A few memories short of a server. Sorry, but I can't resist.

We're supposed to believe that this guy is going to help drag the economy back from the brink of recession, yet he can't throw together a Web site that even meets 1997 standards?

It wasn't supposed to be this way. After all, his official campaign site stated that he would "accelerate e-government" and that "Governor Bush's high-tech plan encourages both growth and opportunity." Maybe he meant that he'd do his best to help get jobs for all those newly unemployed Webmasters of bankrupt dot coms. Gosh, even the many G.W. Bush parody sites look better than the new White House site. Maybe he should go and hire the designers who did the sites at www.gwbush.com, www.bushfordummies.com or www.bushlite.net.

OK, so I'm kind of raving about the new White House site. Granted, there were undeniably time pressures that led to this situation. And perhaps there might be a misunderstanding at work here too–maybe the Bush team, knowing that Al Gore invented the Internet, thought that Gore is so upset with them that he wouldn't share the secret of Flash technology.

So what is the point to my ranting? Because it begs the question, if the leader of the free world isn't really serious about the Web, are leaders in the corporate world? I'm still convinced that the answer is no.

Sure, browse Canadian Web sites, and you will find that, generally, most are relatively current in terms of design and actually are up to date with information content. So we're way ahead of George W., right?

Wrong. Dig beneath the surface, and tremendous challenges still exist. I continue to find, and most surveys echo my sentiment, that many companies still ignore the e-mail support questions that I send them. Errors and problems within Web sites that would result in an outcry if they occurred in the "real world" seem rampant. While finalizing this article, for example, I found that I couldn't access the accounts section of a Web site for a major bank for a period of over two days. And I just tried to sign into the Web site for a computer accessories supplier, only to find that all of my old account details had become–whoops!–inaccessible.

Sure, Web sites are looking great and often sport cool designs, but beneath the surface they are still ugly. The problem here is that while we might have the design elements nailed, we haven't dealt with the infrastructure.

We've simply created a thin veneer on top of a shaky foundation, which doesn't make any sense whatsoever. Organizations that refuse to pay proper attention to the infrastructure behind their sites might as well declare to their customers that they are technological nincompoops, and that they don't care about the new Internet-empowered consumer. Heck, they might as well hang a sign on the home page that says, "Don't do business with us. We don't care about customer support or loyalty. We don't give a hoot about the fact that you want to do business with us this way. Just leave us alone and go away."

Corporate sites might not be as bad as the White House in terms of the design and the message that sends out, but by ignoring infrastructure, they are just as guilty.

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